

Talking points

NFIB

Monday, June 19, 2006

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck our state a grievous blow.

Although the eye of the storm landed at the Mississippi-Louisiana line, that eye was more than thirty miles wide, and Katrina completely devastated our entire coastline, from Pearlington to Pascagoula.

The miles upon miles of utter destruction are unimaginable, except to people who have witnessed it with their own eyes, on the ground. But this hurricane wasn't just a calamity for the Mississippi Gulf Coast; its impact extended far inland with hurricane force more than 200 miles from the Coast.

In her wake, Katrina left literally tens of thousands of uninhabitable, often obliterated homes; thousands of small businesses in shambles; dozens of schools and public buildings ruined and unusable; highways, ports and railroads, water and sewer systems, all destroyed.

We've known from the beginning that Mississippi could not recover and renew from a disaster of this magnitude without the help of others. The outpouring of support and generosity from across the country has been overwhelming, and the financial resources authorized by Congress and the President are proving to be essential.

We are moving forward in Mississippi, making progress every day, but we still have a tall mountain in front of us. Katrina left more than 45 million cubic yards of debris, more than twice the debris left by Hurricane Andrew. And, 10 months after the storm, we are about 98 percent complete with the debris clean-up.

We installed temporary housing quicker than it has ever been done on such a large scale, with more than 38,000 travel trailers and mobile homes occupied by more than 100,000 Mississippians. This is both a blessing and a potential curse as the 2006 hurricane season begins because travel trailers will not stand up to strong winds; they were used only as a temporary measure that helped get people out of tents and shelters.

To help address our biggest issue, housing, we are using Community Development Block Grants to help rebuild homes that were destroyed by the storm surge. Other CDBG funds will be used for water and sewer expansion, mitigation against large utility rate increases, and economic and community development.

We are rebuilding our roads and bridges. We are providing workforce training opportunities to help meet the increased demand for construction related occupations. We have provided financial relief to state and local law enforcement agencies that are overwhelmed with new tasks.

We are helping our school districts, all of which have been open since early November 2005 but whose local tax base is destroyed. We are helping the school districts who have displaced students to educate. We are providing financial assistance to our universities and community college students.

We using new Social Service Block Grant funds to meet increased or unfunded human service needs and demands, such as child care. We have begun the multi-year endeavor of restoring our environmental habitat and coastal protections.

Katrina represents a tragedy of profound proportions, but in that tragedy opportunity abounds.

In the truest entrepreneurial spirit exemplified by members of NFIB, there has never been a better time to invest in Mississippi. You can do well and do good.

South Mississippi's major employers got back to work last fall.

Seven of 12 casinos will be open within one year.

The Gulf Opportunity Zone Act of 2005 is of special interest:

- Federal legislation passed by Congress and signed into law by President Bush in December
- Provides federal tax incentives for areas affected by Hurricane Katrina
- More than half the state is eligible

Mississippi was making great progress in pre-Katrina days:

- Realigned incentives to encourage higher paying jobs in growing sectors
- Enacted what The Wall Street Journal called the most comprehensive tort reform in the country
- Overhauled workforce training program
- No new taxes
- Our state Department of Environmental Quality is very responsive to business

We will make even greater strides in the months to come as we rebuild and renew.